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ABSTRACT

Developing an effective school or district academic competition program that highlights as many academic areas as possible while showcasing the achievements of individual students requires thoughtful assessment and planning. The School Academic Competition Inventory provides a way to determine the potential for such a program. If the potential exists, school leaders must determine (1) the event's main focus--an interdisciplinary emphasis would have the greatest overall impact; (2) the kinds of academic achievement to be emphasized--focusing on general problem-solving skills would allow students to demonstrate their abilities to apply their academic knowledge in various situations; (3) whether individual or team achievement will be emphasized and what skill qualifications will be required to compete; (4) who will control the event--building up a coalition of sponsors would allow schools to develop their own competitions; and (5) the awards and judges. If a school decides to develop a competition on its own, organizers should become familiar with and incorporate suitable features of some of the existing models for competitions, such as the Academic Olympiad (which has recently been successfully applied at Utah State University), the Wise County (Virginia) Program of Academic Challenge for Excellence, and the Kentucky Academic Association. (Each model is discussed separately.) (JD)

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Giving the Competitive Edge to Students' Academic Achievement

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Giving the Competitive Edge to Students' Academic Achievement

When the word "competition" is mentioned in connection with school, almost everyone first thinks of athletics--football, basketball, baseball and other sports which seem to occupy an inordinate amount of students, teachers, and administrators' time, not to mention money. But in reality, the concept of competition reaches beyond athletics to permeate every aspect of the school environment. In fact, it may be the single most powerful influence on learning today. Think of the factors which comprise the school experience for most young people: grades, teachers, peers, jobs, and self identity; all are controlled in large measure by competition.

Athletic coaches long have been aware of the importance of instilling a sense of competition in their players; to a lesser extent, teachers also have recognized this influence and have tried to capitalize upon it in the classroom by organizing spelling bees, having mini-quiz bowls for reviews, holding various types of contests--most books read, greatest number of words written, best performance on tests, etc. However, most of this competition occurs behind closed doors and usually does not come to the public's attention or bring recognition to students beyond the classroom.

That has begun to change. Many school districts are seeking ways to highlight students' academic achievement in an effort to offset the public's perception that the only important student achievement is that which occurs on the playing fields or courts on a weekday night. Considering the small percentage of a student body who actually

demonstrate their achievements this way, it's not surprising that the public remains unaware of what else students may be learning or achieving. To change this perception, some schools have decided to capitalize on the concept of competition, borrow from the success of athletics, and develop various academic contests which can showcase the talents of students, many of whom will never appear on the playing field.

To insure success in this effort, though, school districts must proceed cautiously. Developing school/district academic competitions that are beneficial to students and not mere window dressing for the public requires some thoughtful assessment and planning. The SACI (School Academic Competition Inventory) offers a way to determine the potential in a school or district for an effective academic competition program.

The School Academic Competition Inventory

1. Do the school/district's athletic achievements seem to overshadow academic achievements in the public's mind?
2. Does the academic climate within the school/district need improvement?
3. Could the student body, school staff and the public be made more aware of students' academic potential and achievements in the school/district?
4. Are there academic areas which need greater recognition by students, faculty, administrators, and the public?
5. Do academic contests presently exist in the school or district?
6. Could the variety and number of competitions be increased or consolidated?

7. Are the contests coordinated throughout the school/district to insure quality and recognition of student achievement?
8. Are there potential sponsors for academic competitions?
9. Are there faculty who might be willing to organize and run academic competitions?
10. Is there an individual who could monitor and/or coordinate school/district competitions?

If the majority of responses to the SACI are positive, then educators should consider developing strategies to emphasize the academic accomplishments of students in their schools.

Several options exist for making academic achievement a more visible part of the school environment. Initially, school leaders should look inside the school and examine present practices. In most schools, some academic competitions already exist, most of which are run by departments. English departments will feature literary contests, spelling bees, debate and speech tournaments, yearbook and journalism awards, and drama festivals. Social studies departments offer opportunities to compete in essay writing contests. Science departments often arrange annual science fairs, and mathematics departments have problem-solving competitions. Industrial arts, fine arts, and home economics typically have contests where completed projects are judged. Business departments stress performance via speed contests in typing, shorthand, and keyboarding skills. Music departments perhaps have higher visibility than many other academic departments because of competition in contests outside the school. Such a list seems to suggest that an abundance of academic competition exists within a school, and, in truth, this is so. But often lacking in the midst of all of this competition is some overall coordination

and public display of the achievements that these individual competitions suggest.

If this is the case, educators should explore the feasibility of developing an academic competition which might serve as a capstone event. This event's purpose would be to highlight as many academic areas as possible without diffusing the overall message: recognition of students' academic achievement and potential is a central mission of the school. In deciding if such an event is in the best interests of the school and students, faculty and administrators need to consider first the impact upon students. At least five concerns should be addressed before any final decision is made.

1. Event Focus

   What will be the main focus of the event? Will it be interdisciplinary or will it focus on only one or two academic areas? Although arguments can be presented for either emphasis, the approach likely to have the most impact on the school and the public is the interdisciplinary emphasis. Demonstrating students' abilities in a variety of academic areas sends a strong message that academic achievement is a central element across the school's curriculum.

2. Competitive Skill

   What kinds of competitive skills will be called for in this event: rote recall, general awareness, convergent and/or divergent thinking, problem-solving/decision making? Since such an event should have a high profile for the public, what kind of academic potential and achievement does the school want to highlight?

Central to the decisions here will be the time that can be provided for the competition, the focus of the event itself, and whether or not there will be any preliminary contests leading to the final event in which students can demonstrate a variety of skills as well. Given the nature of the public's current attitude toward education, organizers should look beyond rote recall to promote more emphasis on general awareness and problem-solving skills that can showcase students' abilities to apply their academic knowledge and skills in various situations.

3. Competition Entries

Will the emphasis be placed on individual accomplishment, team achievement or a mixture? What degree of mastery must a student exhibit before being eligible to compete? The process of selecting students for competition is always an important issue for adolescents.

Students and teachers need to know what the expectations are in this area. Organizers should give careful attention to whether or not students of varying academic skill and potential should be encouraged to participate and what their chances of success may be. Of paramount importance is remembering that students who are required to participate in a competition for which they are ill-prepared and which provides little guarantee for success will have every right to regard academic competition as counterproductive to learning.

4. Sponsorship

Does the school want to retain control of the event or make use of existing competitions already established by

outside agencies? The latter are competitions of a regional or national nature which have standards, rules, procedures, and awards already established. A yearly listing of such competitions is available from the National Association of Secondary School Principals Committee on National Contests and Activities.

Schools or districts who want to develop their own events have many resources to draw upon. Competitions even can be matched to individual interests of sponsors if necessary. Banks, newspapers, corporations, radio and television companies, service organizations, unions, colleges and universities are among the most likely candidates as sponsors. With some careful attention to the focus of the event, educators gradually should be able to build a coalition of sponsors. This coalition, in turn, will give more impetus to promoting the interdisciplinary nature of the event and will permit the event to grow from year to year while remaining responsive to new academic thrusts in the school or district's curriculum.

5. Rewards

What will be the rewards for students who participate in the event? How will judges be selected? For events of this nature to take on significance in the minds of the participants as well as of the public, a substantial reward system must exist, and the rewards must be tied to a respected evaluation system which includes qualified judges. Therefore, organizers will need to consider the availability of appropriate prizes and the selection of judges.

The most appropriate form of reward is an academic scholarship awarded in the name of one of the sponsors. Cash awards, bonds or gift certificates are acceptable as are trophies and plaques. Winners also can be awarded academic "letters" from their school or, if the competition involves several schools, an appropriate badge that students can attach to their school jackets.

Selecting judges can become a politically sensitive issue, especially if several schools are meeting for a district-wide competition. Here the public relations effect must be considered. Ideally, representatives from the sponsoring agencies, who do not have children competing, should serve as judges; school superintendents and representatives from local colleges or universities also are acceptable candidates. Only as a last resort should school staff be involved in the judging process. This separation makes it easier for students and faculty to work together in preparation for the event, and the public perceives the competition as a more objective event, one which clearly has the respect and support of individuals outside the immediate school environment.

Assuming that a decision is made to develop a capstone academic event, ample time should be allowed, particularly in the first year, to attend to all of the details and to insure that students, faculty and the public are aware of the significance which will be attached to the competition. Organizers should become familiar with some of the existing models for competitions and decide what features, if any, should be incorporated into their own event.

One of the more popular models is the Academic Olympiad, developed

originally by the Mt. San Antonio Chapter of Phi Delta Kappa in California. The goals of the Olympiad include the following:

A. To confer visibility on scholarly performance through a competitive event

B. To stimulate the academic efforts of high school students

C. To recognize the scholarship of able students and the accomplishments of dedicated teachers

D. To involve a large number of high school students without making excessive demands on their time

E. To promote cooperation between school district representatives and university faculty members in the areas of curriculum and instruction

One of the most recent and successful applications of the Olympiad model can be found in northern Utah at Utah State University. Seven school districts in northern Utah cooperated with the university in developing the Olympiad. Each school district pledged a minimum of $200 to participate and a team coach to coordinate a team from each of the participating schools. The Utah State Office of Education endorsed the concept and provided personnel to assist with test construction and judging. Officials at Utah State University provided facilities and scholarships as well as technical and faculty support. Additional gifts and grants came from businesses and individuals and a $500 grant from Phi Delta Kappa International to the Utah State University Chapter served as seed money for the event.

The original Academic Olympiad took a year to plan. An executive committee comprised of representatives from each of the participating school districts as well as from the university took major responsibility for the planning. Eleven sub-committees handled the key

areas: finances, facilities, publicity and printing, rules and eligibility, recognition and awards, the Star Wars competition, evaluation, and each of the selected academic areas: mathematics, language arts, social sciences, and the sciences. Considerable time had to be devoted to preparing and validating the academic area tests as well as developing the various rules and procedures which teams and coaches would need to follow.

Eighteen high schools from the seven participating districts met in the spring of 1985 on the university campus for the full day of competition. Each high school had a team consisting of 6 members and 3 alternates who had been selected for their knowledge and skills and who met the minimum grade point distribution: (1) two members with gpa's of 3.75 or above; (2) two members with gpa's of 3.0-3.74; (3) two members with gpa's of 2.9 or lower. The three alternates had to be distributed through the three ranges as well. The grade point requirements were established to stimulate scholarship among a broader range of students and to provide motivation for gifted but low-achieving students to perform at higher academic levels.

After a morning of individual subject area tests and a luncheon, the teams gather for the Star Wars Competition, which is the culminating competition for the Olympiad. In this event, the teams compete against each other for team honors. The competition proceeds in 6 rounds of 8 questions each, so that each team member competes. The questions cover a wide range of current events of state, regional, national and international interest, mathematical problems, literary and historical figures, works, and events, scientific theories, etc. Questions are given orally and students respond within ten seconds in written form. The correct answers are announced, and proctors keep a

running tally of each team's performance on large display boards so that the audience and teams can keep track of each team's status.

Following the Star Wars competition, teams and individuals receive awards; these range from scholarships to individual winners in the various academic areas to trophies and plaques for team and school achievements. All team members receive certificates of achievement. Coaches also receive awards based on their teams' performances during the day. No team goes home without substantial recognition. Press coverage is extensive and cooperation from local newspapers and other media outlets has been outstanding. Since the 1985 event, the value of the prizes has escalated, particularly in terms of scholarships, with academic departments at the university vying to attract the students with the highest academic achievements during the Olympiad.

Events like the Olympiad do not necessarily have to involve a large number of districts. For instance, Wise County School District in Virginia conducts its own event which is part of the school system's Program of Academic Challenge for Excellence (PACE). The Wise County program provides a year long series of six academic matches which culminate in an event similar to the Academic Olympiad. The school district has discovered that this kind of competition attracts considerable interest and support from many taxpayers--over 73 percent in Wise County--who do not have children in the schools but who are asked to support the school's programs. Wise County school officials also have discovered that interest in other academic activities has increased to the point where the school system is adding special programs to meet the needs of its academically talented young people.

In Kentucky an even more ambitious program has been underway since 1985. The Kentucky Academic Association (KAA) is a voluntary

state-wide organization with two major functions: (1) to establish and sponsor a state-wide system of academic competition and (2) to monitor all competition occurring in the state and to assess its compliance with standards of educational soundness established by the association. The association is governed by a seventeen member board drawn from various geographic areas in the state as well as from professional organizations connected with the schools. The Board sets policy and reviews the levels of academic competition in the state.

Any accredited public school in Kentucky as well as any private school which voluntarily complies with state accreditation standards and admission policies is eligible for membership in KAA. The Association offers three divisions for membership: high school (9-12), middle grades (6-8), and elementary (K-5). Schools pay nominal membership fees for each division in which they compete and are eligible to participate in all Association-sponsored competition held in the appropriate division.

The Association's main event is called the Governor's Cup Competition. It is a year long three tiered (district, regional, and state) competition with those successful at one level advancing to the next. Four categories make up each level of the competition:

1. Quick_Recall --teams of four students compete to provide factual answers to questions presented in a "college bowl" format.
2. Creative_Expression --teams of four students work to solve a problem presented to them on the day of the competition.
3. Written_Assessment --individual students take a written test in math, science, social studies, or language arts.
4. English_composition --individual students are given a topic

on which they must write a well-developed essay within a specified time.

A state champion is determined in each category (four champions in the written assessment category). In addition, the Association uses a point system to determine the school whose students collectively achieve the highest level of performance at the state level. That school receives the Governor's Cup. Any student of a member school is eligible to represent that school in the competition.

The Association also monitors each academic competition in Kentucky to be certain it meets the standards of educational quality which it feels all such competitions should achieve. The Association annually publishes a directory which lists all of the approved academic competitions in the state. The directory also provides a calendar of events for all competition along with sponsors, locations, descriptions, and contact persons.

Efforts such as the ones in Kentucky, Utah and Virginia are being duplicated throughout the country. They clearly demonstrate that bringing the competitive edge to academic excellence results in respect and support for the basic mission of all schools: promoting academic potential and achievement among students.

Notes

[1]adapted from Melvin Zirkes and Robert Penna, "Academic Competitions--One Way to Improve School Climate." NASSP Bulletin 68:94-97, December 1984.

[2]Varnell Bench and Oral L. Ballam, "Competition and Collaboration: An Academic Olympiad." Phi Delta Kappan, February 1986, pp. 456-458.

[3]Ann Gregory and Jim D. Graham, "And Our Bonus-round Question Is, 'Can Schools Spotlight Good Students?'" The American School Board Journal 171:29+, August 1984.

[4]For further information about the KAA, contact KAA, 1121 Louisville Road, Frankfort, KY 40601.